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Men are from Earth, and So are Women

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October 2006

Retrieved on 29th January 2021 from
anarchism.pageabode.com
Published in *Red and Black Revolution* No. 11.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

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A woman's place is to wait and listen, says the Vatican, John Hooper and Jo Revill, Sunday August 1, 2004, The Observer
Interview with Alice Kessler Harris: www.pbs.org
Sadker, M and Sadker, D (1994) Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls, Scribner.

those other voices are in the minority, we need to actively go out and seek those alternative perspectives.

This is different from saying, as John Gray does, that women and men are so different they need a self-help book to be able to understand each other. This doesn't mean that we believe that men and women occupy different spheres of life, that some are best suited to revolutionary organisation, while others are not.

It does mean however that we try as revolutionaries to look beyond our own world-view (and of course this doesn't apply just to gender, it holds true for race, nationality, and all the other aspects of culture). In the pages of their papers and at their meetings, Mujeres Libres gave voice to women's experiences.

Mujeres Libres also worked to challenge restrictive gender roles. It is generally true that you cannot do what you haven't dreamt. If a woman never imagines herself taking part in an anarchist organisation, if she doesn't see a role for herself within that organisation, it is very unlikely that she will ever feel motivated to join one.

As a women's only group, Mujeres Libres automatically gave to women a space where they knew, by virtue of their gender, that they were welcomed and needed. From that starting point, the women involved undertook work that was more usually done by men; they organised meetings, they spoke at meetings, they travelled around the country.

Mujeres Libres also had the advantage that they were working in revolutionary times, and so the fight for women's liberation became part and parcel of the new society that was being built. Today's anarchists operate in less optimistic times and, though for women things are a lot freer than they were in 1930s Spain, the problem of how to create revolutionary organisations which reflect the full diversity of society have yet to be solved.

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Many voices make up the movement

So where does this leave us – knowing that genders are not as different as often described but also aware that gender (as do other cultural attributes) can colour the way in which we perceive and act within the world?

A key starting point for any group, movement or society who want to mobilise the full potential and creativity of humanity is to challenge the gendered nature of roles. This begins when we challenge the idea that the differences between the genders are based on biology, rather than experience.

However, this doesn't mean that we are all the same – men, women, old, young, city dweller, country person, black, white – rather that our different experiences have created a diversity of characteristics, attitudes, values and identities. The movements and the society we are trying to build have to allow a voice to this diversity.

Women are under-represented in anarchist groups throughout the world, and this means our movements are considerably weaker as we are losing the point of view, the experiences, the skills and understandings of a large portion of humanity.

One of the few groups who seriously and successfully faced up to this problem was the anarchist group Mujeres Libres, who fought during the Spanish Civil War. They recognised that the problem of incorporating women into the anarchist movement operated on many different levels. On one hand there was the obvious sexism of part of the anarchist movement, which needed to be combated.

In a less obvious way, many men in the anarchist movement were and are, gender blind. That is they do not realise that their own way of seeing the world is coloured by their own gender and aren't aware of or interested in understanding other perspectives. While we all naturally make sense of the world from the point of view of our own experiences, we also need to be able to realise that our experiences aren't universal. Where

Different experiences, different responses

In those areas where men and women behave differently, it is in large part because they are treated differently growing up. An example of this different treatment can be found in a study by Myra and David Sadker in which they looked at the different ways boys and girls were treated in US high schools. After three years of classroom observations, they discovered a hidden, unconscious bias that neither teachers nor students were aware of.

Boys were asked more questions, were praised more, referred to more in class, girls were less often called on, often ignored, to the extent that teachers would stand with their back to the girls while talking to the boys. In addition, in the text books given to the students, women's contribution to society was often absent, ignored or hidden. Finally there was a tolerance of sexual discrimination of girls by other children or indeed incidences of sexual discrimination by teachers.

The result of this was that as you look at the progression of girls throughout the education system they become progressively quieter. In a typical US college classroom, 45% of the students don't participate by asking and answering questions, and the majority of those are women. In light of this study, the behavioural findings on conversation interruptions don't seem to be that surprising.

The Sadker study found that over time, due to their different experiences growing up, boys and girls acted in different ways within the classroom. The Hyde study also found some differences in behaviour but emphasised that these differences are not as great as the similarities.

Gender is not as it appears in the popular media and general conversations.

How different are men and women? Very, according to some. John Gray's book "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus" is based on the idea that there are fundamental differences between the genders. It may be just another self-help book on relationships, but it has also sold over 30 million copies and been translated into 40 languages.

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Deborah Tannen's book "You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation" was on the New York Times best-seller list for nearly four years and has been translated into 24 languages. Pope Benedict, when still a cardinal (and an obvious expert on gender) in a statement on the role of women wrote that women's characteristics were "*listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting*" in the first statement published by the Catholic church on the role of women in a decade. In January 2005, the president of Harvard argued that women were underrepresented in science because biologically they weren't as capable at scientific thinking as men. During

his time as President the number of tenured jobs offered to women at Harvard fell from the low 36% to the even lower 13%.

While we may not care very much about the pope or pop-psychology, their ideas carry weight with large segments of the world's population.

The idea that men and women are fundamentally different can also be found on the left. Some women's peace groups, such as the Greenham Common women, base their activity on women's supposed opposition to war and violence. Or to take a more recent example, some of the supporters of the centre-left President of Chile Michelle Bachelet, argued that as a woman she is better able to multi-task and thus more able for the job; *"She is going to take the reins of this country as if it were a big house. She is going to manage us well. Look at us men, we do one thing at a time, while the mom is cooking, talking on the phone, feeding the children and listening to the radio!"*

If you just listened to popular media and general conversations, you would expect the genders to be worlds apart. Yet a study by Shibley Hyde found far more similarities than differences. This article looks at this research, and then asks in the light of it why might the idea of gender difference be so popular presently.

Mostly the same

Published in the "American Psychologists" in September 2005, the research challenges the idea that men and women are very different psychologically. Shibley Hyde reviewed the results from 46 surveys and concluded that men and women are similar on most, but not all, psychological variables.

Arguments about the roles that men and women play in society often revolve around whether these roles are due to nature (our genetic make up) or nurture (the type of society we live in). The implication of this research is to overturn the idea that

Differences aren't stable

They also found that in some areas there are little differences in childhood, but differences develop in the teenage years. So for example, in high school, a small difference emerges favouring males in terms of solving complex problems. This small variation in differences over time, Shibley Hyde argues, overthrows *'the notions that gender differences are large and stable'* (p588), that men have permanently set up camp on Mars which is a great distance from Venus.

The study also highlights the importance of context in determining gender differences.

So for example, averaging out over all the studies, it was found that men helped more. But if the studies were separated into those where the helping occurred when onlookers were present, and those where onlookers were absent, it was found that a large gender difference only occurred when onlookers were present.

This difference, she argues, can be explained by looking at social roles – in western society 'heroism' is seen as a masculine attribute, which means that men are more likely to help others when they are doing it in a public way that might be interpreted as heroic. The difference in one trait 'helping others' can be large, favouring males, or close to zero, depending on the social context in which that trait occurs.

Similar differences were found when looking at interruptions to conversations – very little difference were found in groups of two, and small differences were found in groups of three and more. Again the social context affects the behavioural response – and the idea that there are fixed male and female responses, which we are all hardwired to perform, is undermined.

it is put, should make us very wary of arguments that take difference as their starting point.

Mostly the same, a little different, what next?

So far I've been arguing that the similarities are far greater than the difference, but that doesn't mean that differences don't exist or that they aren't important. Women and men are treated differently in society and this different experience affects the roles that women and men play.

In her study, Shibley Hyde conducted a review of 46 studies, each of which themselves was a review of other studies. Hundreds of reports were involved. She grouped her data into six categories and set about seeing if she could find any evidence of difference. The categories were: those studies that assessed cognitive variables; that assessed verbal and non-verbal communication; that assessed social or personality variables; that assessed measures of psychological well-being (for example self-esteem); that assessed motor behaviour (for example, how far can you throw a ball) and finally a category of miscellaneous reports, such as 'moral reasoning'.

As with the earlier Maccoby and Jacklin study, she found gender differences in a few very specific areas. The first area is, not surprisingly, throwing ability. Men can throw a ball further and faster than women. The second area was found in some measures of sexuality – men masturbate more and have different attitudes to casual sex. The third and final area was in levels of aggression, in particular in levels of physical aggression.

male and female roles are connected to particular characteristics of men or women.

In 1974 Maccoby and Jacklin analysed the results from over 2,000 psychological studies on gender difference and in doing so they overturned many myths; girls aren't more social than boys, neither are they more suggestible, girls aren't any better at learning off by heart, boys aren't good at more abstract learning, girls don't have lower self esteem and it is not true that girls lack motivation.

In all they found only four areas where gender differences were evident; verbal ability, visual-spatial ability, mathematical ability and aggression. Yet despite the fact that overwhelmingly their story was one of similarity, almost all reports of their work focused on the differences.

So why if genders, in the main, behave similarly are they perceived to be different?

Same behaviour, different perceptions

One explanation for this is that the meaning attached to the behaviour varies depending on whether you are a man or a woman. So, for example, if a woman isn't good at map reading, this is seen to be proof that women are less spatially aware. If a man isn't good at map reading, well it's just one of those things that he's not very good at. I once asked a teenage boy what toys he played with as a child. Like most boys, he played with action man. He went on to say that he thought action man was 'cool', while Barbie was stupid. Despite the fact that both toys are essentially the same – a piece of plastic representing a person – to him the possibilities and meanings attached to the male toy were far more positive than the female toy. Mars and Venus are the same place, they are just seen from different perspectives.

What does it mean to come from Venus?

Society attributes different meanings to similar behaviours. In fact, even stranger, society is quite happy to talk about very different behaviours as if they were all similar. So for example, what to people mean when they say 'women's work'?

One certain thing that can be said about gender roles, despite the Mars/Venus clichés, is that they vary greatly between different cultures, classes and change over time. Venus seems to be a number of radically different planets. In Ireland, nursing is a women's profession, in southern Italy most nurses are men. This is because in the south of Italy, labour market shortages were so great, that one of the few jobs available was nursing, and as traditionally men were seen as the major bread-owners, these became seen as 'male'.

The daughter of a manual labourer on a poor Dublin housing estate is more likely to see her role in terms of motherhood and so will often start her family early in life. In contrast the daughter of a doctor might be expected to go to university, and establish a career before she has children. And on the other end of the scale, the role of Paris Hilton, the daughter of a multi-millionaire, seems to be to be thin, shop and act stupid.

Over time, the role women were expected to play within capitalism has varied. In the early factories they were valued (as were children) as a cheap form of labour. Then they were moved to the home, where their role was to provide all the social care and support required to keep the workforce ticking over.

So for example, in the US during the depression working women were accused of taking men's jobs. Although the numbers of women working outside the home increased gradually from the 1900s, in general this was acceptable only for single women. In Ireland, it wasn't until the early 1970s that married women were allowed to continue working in the public sector. When women were in paid employment, it was in those sectors

that mirrored their role in the home such as domestic work, or caring work such as nursing. But the idea that women's role was in the home has been overturned at certain points.

This happened most dramatically during World War Two when propaganda extolled the virtues of women working – in fact, the skills they used at home were argued to be the same as the skills needed in the workplace. Alice Kesser Harris explains, "They were induced into the labour force with a rhetoric which played on their housewifely role. For example, they were told that operating a drill press was just like operating a can opener; that wielding a welding torch, for example, was just like operating a mix-master might have been; that a drill press was like an iron."

After the war, although in the US 75% of women said they would like to keep their jobs, about 90 % ended up being forced to leave. Once again women's place was in the home.

Today women make up a greater part of the labour force than ever before. In the west, manufacturing has declined, while service industries and knowledge industries have grown. Throughout the world women are paid less than men and in order to attract cheaper female labour, women's characteristics are once more being re-defined as useful on the labour market. So for example, women are argued to be good listeners and empathic, and so make good call centre employees, or women are good at multitasking and so suited to IT work; an article on Microsoft's webpage argues that "Biology, upbringing make women more flexible" and so they are better managers."

In fact there is a certain irony that as the workplace is becoming more female, the idea that genders are very different seems to be gaining increasing popularity (or at least, if the sales of John Gray's books are anything to go by).

The idea of gender differences can be used to either exclude women (as in the position of women in Harvard) or to attract more women (as in the call centre workers). The malleability of the idea of difference, and the different political uses to which